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# Perspectives of Teachers Who Choose to Leave the Field

Kirsten L. Dunstan

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**Perspectives of Teachers Who Choose to Leave the Field**

**Kirsten L. Dunstan**

**Submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Masters of Arts in Education**

**AUGSBURG COLLEGE  
MINNEAPOLIS, MINNESOTA**

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MASTER OF ARTS IN EDUCATION  
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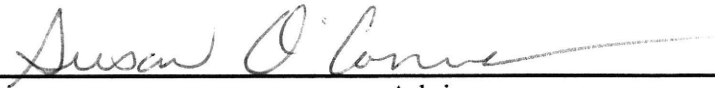
CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

This is to certify that the Action Research Final Project of Kirsten L. Dunstan has been approved by the Review Committee and fulfills the requirements for the Master of Arts in Education Degree.

Date of Symposium: December 4, 2007

Date Completed: January 12, 2008

Committee:



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Advisor



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Reader

## DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this paper to the many people in my life now and in the past who believe in me and help me to finally believe in myself while I made my way through the education system.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank all the participants in this study who gave me their time and shared their stories and insights. It was a wonderful experience to sit and talk freely with them about their experiences good and bad. In the end, they all helped me to see the joy in education.

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I would like to thank my family, most especially my husband Paul who told me to, "not worry, it will all work out," as I returned to college. He is patient with me and makes me feel proud of myself by the pride he shows in me. I also would like to thank my mom and my sister. They have been invaluable in the completion of this work and many others. Their constant support and belief in me helps me when I am ready to give up. I also want to say a special thank you to my niece Emma. Without her, I never would have ever wanted to work with kids.

To my Augsburg friends, thank you for helping me through this journey and giving me the best college experience ever.

## ABSTRACT

### Perspectives of Teachers Who Choose to Leave the Field

Kirsten L. Dunstan

January 12, 2008

☐ Leadership Application Project (EDC 585)

☒ Action Research (EDC 587) Final Project

This is a qualitative research project focusing on seven experienced teachers perspectives of why they chose to leave the classroom. For this project, an experienced teacher is defined as a person who has taught for at least four years. Seven participants were interviewed on a variety of issues related to their perspectives on teaching based on their background as related to education and teaching experience, their perceptions of the teaching profession, whether they participated in a mentor program, their views on the support they received as teachers and finally, what their own reasons were for leaving. Identifying why experienced teachers leave the classroom can help districts to identify and in turn determine ideas and programs that may help keep teachers from leaving the profession.

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## **Introduction**

“One thousand teachers across the nation leave the profession every day,” (Cavanaugh 2005, p. 1). This is an alarming number when you consider that there are only 3,051,000 teachers in the United States (U.S. Census Bureau April 2004). If you calculate the percentage based on an average school year, it means that we are losing approximately 5% of our teachers a year. This has a major effect on students, the ones most affected by changes in staffing in the school and classroom.

When a person makes the decision to become a teacher, he is choosing a very specific educational path. A teacher’s educational background includes a series of classes and experiences aimed at preparing him to work in a classroom. When a person leaves college with his teaching degree, he typically is licensed by the state and has spent many hours preparing to be of charge in a classroom. Why, then, after all the hours of preparation and years of experience, would he choose to no longer work as a teacher? What drives a person who was on a very specific career path to teach decide he no longer wants that career?

Research suggests many reasons why new teachers leave. A study completed in 2005 lists common problems such as money issues, conflict with administration, and excessive paperwork (Schlichte, Yssel & Merbler, 2005). The same researchers also contend that the isolation and need for mentors, or the lack of a good listening ear, can cause a new teacher to leave.

It can be very costly for school districts when new teachers leave not only their districts but the profession due to the cost of training the district provides to help launch the new teacher (Boe, Bobbit, Cook, Whitener & Weber, 1997). Further, there are the high

recruitment expenses to replace personnel. Schools have tried to put in place mentorship programs and incentive pay plans to encourage new teachers to stay in the district. Most research available focuses on how to help the new teacher and the effects of losing the experienced teacher, but it does not focus on why experienced teachers leave the field.

No Child Left Behind or Public Law 107-110 requires that all teachers in a classroom must meet the standards of “highly qualified” which are, “(1) attaining a bachelor’s degree or better in subject taught; (2) obtaining full state teacher certification; and (3) demonstrating knowledge in the subjects taught” (ED.gov 2007, para. 2). Districts need to examine more carefully how to keep these highly qualified, experienced teachers in the classroom.

The success of students can be directly attributed to having highly-qualified, experienced teachers in the classroom (Darling Hammond, 2003). If the school district needs to fill teaching positions on a regular basis, it is likely a new and inexperienced teacher will fill the position. Although the new teacher can introduce new ideas to the system, the students are affected by having inexperienced instructors who need to learn the nuances of teaching as well as the classroom dynamics for a specific group of students.

Some of the reasons new teachers leave education are unsatisfactory pay levels (Boe, Bobbitt, Cook, Whitener & Weber, 1997), lack of mentorship programs, the paperwork and caseload, and the support or lack of support of the administration (Schlichte, Yssel & Merbler, 2005). Do these same reasons apply for the experienced teacher, or are there additional reasons outside of the school district’s control, such as changes in a teacher’s personal life like changes in marital status, starting a family or relocation of their family to a different area that cause an experienced teacher to leave? After a teacher has invested so much of his life to the field of teaching, what could cause him to decide to leave? Are the

issues that the new teacher faces still applicable to the experienced teacher's reasons to leave or do different issues arise the more a person teaches? This research examines this question, from the perspective of seven teachers with five or more years of classroom experience.



## **Literature Review**

There are many reasons why the issue of teachers leaving the classroom needs to be examined. One is that it can be costly to a school district to replace teachers regularly. The passing of Public Law 107-110 or No Child Left Behind requires that school districts must have only teachers in all educational settings that are deemed 'highly qualified', which is a teacher who is fully state certified or who has passed the state teacher licensing exams (Faircloth, 2004) in the all educational settings. This compounds a difficult situation for school districts. They not only must try to find teachers, but those teachers must also be highly qualified as defined by PL 107-110. To this point, the focus has been only on the attrition rates among teachers with less than five years of experience. These rates are alarming; by the end of the first year, 25% of new teachers leave their classrooms, 40% leave by the end of two years and only 50% of the remaining new teachers stay on after five years (Minarik, Thornton & Perreault, 2003). This review will first discuss the importance of teacher retention and then examine four areas that have been identified as causes of teacher attrition. These are: salary, working conditions, mentorship programs, and administration.

### ***Retention***

When a district loses a teacher they now have to take resources away from areas like staff development to, "devote attention, time and financial resources to initiatives designed to attract additional candidates to replace those who have left the profession," (Scherer 2003, p. 2). In this research, Scherer discusses not only the monetary problems of retention but goes on to explain that districts need to understand why people leave positions in order to replace them. She introduces the theory that if policies are created only out of reacting to the

problem, then the problem of teacher retention will continue. Raphael Wilkins discusses how, “retention strategies treat symptoms, not causes,” (Wilkins 2003, p. 10). Wilkins’ makes the point that the topic of teacher retention must be discussed, as well as the importance of supporting the experienced teachers. Wilkins also concludes that a school district’s human resource department needs to be examined, so that it is encouraged to promote professional development for teachers.

Teacher retention is an important issue because of how costly it is for school districts to replace teachers. According to Colgan, “America’s schools spend more than \$2.6 billion dollars annually to replace teachers who have left the profession,” (Colgan 2004, p. 9). Colgan suggests that there is a high cost to replacing teachers, supporting the argument for the importance of retaining experienced teachers. In another article he discusses the important reasons for retaining teachers, and highlights the effects that teacher attrition has on the students and their need for highly qualified teachers (Colgan, 2004). Colgan continues to discuss the monetary cost of attrition to the district, but concedes that the true high cost is the loss of experienced teacher in a classroom and the possible negative effects on the students. He concludes by listing ideas that school districts could use to try to improve teacher retention.

Darling Hammond and Berry concede in their research that school districts have tried to implement various proactive approaches to prevent attrition such as “...free tuition and housing loans,” (Darling Hammond & Berry 2006, p. 16) and suggest ideas that could help recruit and retain qualified staff such as scholarships, required commitments by new teachers, support new teacher with mentors that match a new teachers field, and increase pay along with their working conditions, yet teacher attrition still occurs.

## ***Contributing Factors to the Decision to Leave***

### ***Salary***

Teaching is a field many professionals enter not because they are monetarily motivated, but because they are altruistically motivated. A teacher feels a need to teach and may not be altered based on his salary. However, school districts have begun to look into implementing pay incentive programs as a way to motivate teachers to remain in the profession.

In research conducted by Boe, Bobbitt, Cook, Whitener & Weber (1997), information is presented based on quantitative research that shows teachers at the lower end of the base salary scale are more likely to leave. Their research concludes that well paid teachers are more likely to remain in teaching. They suggest that you need to, “Place teachers in full-time assignments, for which they are fully certified, and pay them high salaries,” (Boe, Bobbitt, Cook, Whitener & Weber 1997, p. 407). Then teachers will remain in their positions. Darling Hammond also discusses that salary matters to teachers when they are at the beginning of their careers (Darling Hammond, 2003). However, she does suggest that, “...teachers are more altruistically motivated than are some other workers,” (Darling Hammond 2003, p. 9), suggesting that teachers are not motivated by money but rather a concern for others. Darling Hammond concludes that the longer a teacher remains in the classroom, the less salary is a factor in the decision to leave.

The perception of a teacher’s salary may change depending on how a teacher perceives his working conditions (Jacobson, 2007). Jacobson presents research in which he notes that signing bonuses and incentives may get the teacher in the room, but it does not get them to stay (Jacobson, 2007). Jacobson reinforces the theory that teachers are not motivated

by money to teach, but rather the possibility of a positive working environment. This research shows that teachers are not motivated merely by how much they are paid, but rather by how positive their working environment is.

The above research discusses that salary may in fact alter a teachers perspective of his job, however the research does not suggest that they left because of their salary. In fact, what this research suggests is that as a teacher gains more years experience, his salary becomes less of a factor in his job satisfaction. This research suggests that job satisfaction becomes a much more motivating factor to remain in a position the more years a teacher works.

### ***Working Conditions***

A teacher's working environment can greatly affect his desire to stay in a position. Working conditions encompass many different aspects such as physical classroom space, classroom materials, student discipline, views of the position in the school held by colleagues and the community, caseloads or workloads, and the paperwork. In an article titled "Why Teachers Quit" Palmer sums it up by noting, "The problem, experts say, is that teaching has gotten harder," (Palmer 2007, p. 45).

The conditions that a new teacher works under can leave a long-term affect on their teaching skills and desire to teach. Eileen Mary Weiss addressed that; "Adverse workplace conditions may affect new teachers' commitment and intentions to stay and may leave an indelible imprint on the structure and quality itself" (Weiss 1999, p. 862). Weiss proposes the theory that a teachers' work environment can have long-term affects on a teacher. If it is a positive experience, then a teacher will develop in a positive way, but if the work environment is negative it may cause a potentially good teacher to become ineffective. Weiss

concedes that it is this possibility of negative working conditions that ultimately causes the teacher to leave the profession.

Teachers are being asked to do more with less every year. There are battles for budgetary money to get new materials or replace missing materials. There are the arguments over reducing class sizes to better meet the needs of the students. The physical classroom and building can also play into the working conditions. Teachers who work in lower socio-economic neighborhoods or areas where buildings are in poor condition, with less money for textbooks, much larger class size and report that they are more willing to leave their positions (Darling Hammond, 2003). Darling Hammond ties the above factors into research that has been completed to creating a theory that, in fact, working conditions in lower socio-economic neighborhoods can be difficult for teachers.

Working conditions can also refer to the caseloads or amount of children that a teacher teaches. In many schools the more challenging students with more discipline issues are placed on the newer teachers' caseloads (Otto & Arnold, 2005). This study discusses further that the working conditions ties in directly to the support that a new teacher feels he receives from his administration. The discussion continues by focusing on support or lack of support a teacher receives and the effects that has on their desire to remain in the profession.

Finally, the work environment can be greatly affected by how a teacher's position is viewed by his colleagues in the school. "Building-level support from principals and teachers has strong direct and indirect effects on virtually all critical aspects of teachers' working conditions" (Gersten, Keating, Yovanoff & Harniss 2001, p. 557). This study shows that there is a correlation between how a person perceives his working conditions and how he

perceives his colleagues view him. This research mentions that it is the new teacher who is most affected by working conditions while experienced teachers are less affected.

### ***Mentorship Programs***

Mentorship is, “a relationship in which a person with greater experience or wisdom guides another to a higher level of personal and professional experience,” (Hairston 2000, p. 31). Schools have created mentorship programs to help new teachers become more comfortable in their environment and to give them an experienced teacher who is available to them to help guide them. Stamps concludes that, “New teachers who have mentors are almost twice as likely to stay in education” (Stamps 2005, p. 42). Mentor programs in education grew very rapidly in the late 1980’s, “In 1987 only 17 states had mentoring programs, and one year later only three states did not have some type of mentoring program,” (Stamps 2005, p. 42). Stamps concludes that mentorship programs are an important part of helping a new and inexperienced teacher to remain in education.

There have been many different mentorship programs used across both the state of Minnesota and the United States. The degree of involvement in a mentorship program varies from district to district, but teachers report that mentoring programs helped them to stay with teaching (*NEA Today*, 2004). Mentoring programs are an excellent way to connect the experienced teacher with a new teacher to share expertise in education. It is also a wonderful way to help a new teacher become acclimated to the social cues in a school, and it gives him a buddy to go to for help.

Mentorship has benefits to more than just the new teacher. “This process results in a more confident teacher and in turn a more confident student” (Brown 2003, p. 19). Brown discusses the benefits to a district of creating and utilizing an effective mentorship program

that carefully pairs staff together to help the new teacher to become a more reflective teacher. She stresses the importance of a district choosing their mentors carefully so that the program is most effective for the new teacher, concluding that a mentor program can create a professional culture, in turn helping to retain teachers in the profession.

Not every teacher with the required experience will make a good mentor. A mentor needs to be a person who will give the time to nurture, give guidance and act as a role model to the new teacher. For a first year teacher to feel that the mentor was effective, the mentor needs to actually care about the person they are mentoring (Schlichte, Yassel & Merbler, 2005). Schlichte, Yassel and Merbler found in their discussions with new teachers that a mentor needs to be a person that a new teacher can go to during that first year to talk about anything they need to discuss and get helpful feedback. They concede that being an experienced teacher does not make a good mentor.

Mentorship programs allow the teaching staff to create a community in which all teachers' are supported and encouraged. School districts need to start to look at their educators as a whole and no longer as parts. Minarik, Thornton and Perreault (2003) suggest that schools need to apply Systems Thinking to education. Systems Thinking contends that all of the teachers are an important part of the whole and that if one leaves, the reasons for the departure need to be examined versus just replacing the teacher who left (Minarik, Thornton & Perreault, 2003). This theory addresses not only retaining new teachers but also continually supporting all staff through mentoring programs by the experienced teaching staff. They also present the theory that districts and schools should utilize experienced teachers as mentors by creating teacher teaming and mentorship programming. They conclude that using experienced teachers as models for new teachers creates a community of

teachers. Creating a community of teachers fosters an inviting and friendly atmosphere in which a person will feel comfortable enough to stay and grow in their profession.

### ***Administration***

The administration that a teacher works with can be a deciding factor on whether a teacher is going to remain with a district or in teaching in general. If a teacher feels that the administration is not listening to him or taking his opinions and ideas seriously, he can feel that he is not valued at that school. The relationship that the teacher has with the building principal can affect his experience in that school. The principal of the building, according to Minarik, Thornton and Perreault, “can develop teacher teams, mentor programs and appropriate staff development” (2003, p. 232). The theory presented is that a principal can appear to be part of the team by fostering professional growth and relationships with staff, which in turn creates a stronger team.

One example comes from Ravenswood City School District in California where there was a teacher retention problem. The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation provided a grant to a program called the New Teacher Center, which provides intensive mentoring programs to schools and schools in the Ravenswood City School District were included in the program. Not only did the program include teachers working with teachers, but the program grew to where principals and district office staff worked in the program as well. The program has given the teachers and staff at Ravenswood a sense of power in their district and more importantly, “the initiative has brought back a sense of hope, collaboration, and stability to the district” (Olson 2007, p 4).

How much of a role does administrative support play in a teacher’s motivation to remain in the profession? A study conducted to determine the predictors of commitment to a



school district, it was concluded that the principal could play a big role in increasing the commitment of the staff. “A potential strategy for increasing commitment among teachers is for principals to engage in a variety of support behaviors including feedback, encouragement, acknowledgement, use of participative decision making and collaborative problem solving” (Billingsley & Cross 1992, p. 468). Research conducted by Herbert Ware and Anastasia Kitsantas confirm that when administration supports a learning environment, the teacher feels more effective in their role (Ware & Kitsantas 2007).

### ***Summary***

Studies show that mentorship programs, administration support, working conditions, and salary all can be contributing factors for the attrition rates of new teachers. It is costly for a district to continuously replace teachers, but there is also a cost to the classroom. It is difficult for students to lose the experience that teachers bring to their classrooms. The factors that cause a new teacher to leave may be salary, administrative support, lack of effective mentorship programs and working conditions. Are these the same factors that cause an experienced teacher to leave the profession? The loss of an experienced teacher in a district can cause a ripple effect throughout the learning community, which makes this an important subject to examine.

## **Methodology**

This research is best met through a qualitative action research method that, “uses narrative, descriptive approaches to data collections to understand the way things are and what it means from the perspective of the research participants” (Mills 2007, p. 4). This method involves the use of in-depth interviews with participants to gain their perspectives and insights (Mills, 2007). The in-depth interviews are the data collected which is, “the rough materials researchers collect from the world they are studying; they are the particulars that form the basis of analysis, “ (Bogdan, 1992). By using this method for this research subject, it is possible to examine why it is that a person who took a very specific career path decides to no longer work in his original chosen field in education. The purpose of utilizing the qualitative research approach for this project is to be able to get the perspective of the participants.

The teachers and former teachers were selected for this study based on two main factors: (1) they had been a teacher in a classroom for no less than four years and (2) they had left or were considering leaving teaching in the classroom. This research involves in-depth interviews and audio recordings (Mills 2007). The data collected for this research focuses on their perspectives related to what caused them to leave the profession.

Participants were between the ages of 25-70 and were both male and female teachers. There were no limitations as far as from where they received their education, where they taught or were teacher in general education classrooms or special education classrooms, or which subject they taught.

The research began by first determining possible candidates. I talked with colleagues, family members and friends to get the names of teachers and former teachers who might be willing to participate. From this list of names, I contacted the candidates and asked if they would be willing to participate in a research project regarding their experiences with teaching. I approached a total of twelve candidates, and of the twelve, seven were willing to sit with me to be interviewed. Of the candidates who agreed to participate, I set up a time to meet with them privately at a location of their choice convenient to them, which included their private homes, coffee shops and restaurants.

The interviews took place at locations throughout the Minneapolis/St. Paul Metropolitan area. I began each interview by first talking about what the research project was about. I attempted to make participants comfortable with both me and with the recording device. I also was clear about what we would be discussing and assured each that they did not have to answer any questions with which they were uncomfortable.

Each participant was asked a series of questions in an in-depth interview process that allowed for them to discuss their personal experiences with as much detail as possible. I was able to converse more freely with each participant in their interview and allowed the interview to take on different directions with each participant. At the end of the interview, I allowed each to discuss topics not covered by the interview questions that they wanted to talk about. Through the interview process, these current and former educators opened up to share the experiences that shaped their careers in education.

### ***The Participants***

All names of the participants has been changed and no direct identification has been made of the school districts they worked for or colleges they attended.

*Bob*

Bob is a 35 year-old teacher who had been teaching for six years, and at the time of the interview was contemplating leaving his current district. He began his educational career as a paraprofessional while he was attending college. After receiving his degree in elementary education K-9, he decided to pursue a career in special education. He received his Emotional Behavioral Disorder (EBD) endorsement on his teaching license and then his Master's Degree. He has taught in both elementary and middle school EBD classrooms. He currently works in a suburban middle school in a level 2 and 3 EBD setting (the setting numbers are based on the amount of time that a student receives special education services outside of their regular education classroom; a level two refers to a student spending between 21% to 60% of their school day in the special education classroom and a level three is a student spending over 60% of their school day in a special education classroom).

*Gloria*

Gloria is 66 years old and is retired and works as a sales associate. She attended college at a large university and began teaching right after college. She taught for over five years and then did some substituting. She worked in two suburban schools, one urban school, and two small town schools. Gloria taught Language Arts for eighth and ninth grades and still prefers teaching junior high students. She left teaching in 1967 returning in the early 1980's to do some substitute work. Gloria left teaching completely because there were no jobs for teachers in the early 1980's in the area in which she lived.

*Jane*

Jane is 66 years old and is currently retired but tutors students as often as she can.

She taught for a total of approximately 36 years and loves being in the classroom. Jane first attended a junior college moving to a large university to get her teaching degree and later went back to get her special education certification. Throughout her career, she worked with elementary grades teaching students in general and special education. Jane left teaching for ten to fifteen years and then returned to work full time in special education. In 2002 Jane retired, but continues to volunteer to tutor students.

#### *Jennifer*

Jennifer is 28 years old and is currently completing her sixth year of teaching. She attended college at a major university and went specifically for the education program. She has taught grades K-8 and is currently working as an EBD teacher in a resource room in a junior high school. Jennifer chose to leave teaching at the end of the 2006-2007 school years to pursue another career.

#### *Kathy*

Kathy is 49 years old and is currently a paraprofessional in an elementary school. She went to college at small state teacher college. Kathy received her degree in business education and taught business education for six years in a high school setting. Kathy left teaching when she and her husband moved from the area where she was working and she found out that she was pregnant with her first daughter. She never returned to teaching and allowed her license to lapse. When her daughters started school, she returned to education as a paraprofessional, but has no plans to ever return to teaching and is currently contemplating leaving her job.

#### *Lynn*

Lynn is 47 and is a principal at an elementary school in a suburban district. She

attended college at a large university where she received her horticulture degree. Lynn ran her own business and returned to college to pursue her teaching degree when her daughters started school. She was a substitute teacher in small towns, taking as many long-call positions as she could until she was able to settle in at a suburban district. While there, she obtained her master's degree and did not want the learning to end so she pursued her administration license. She worked as an assistant principal at a suburban school and then became a principal at a different suburban elementary school. Throughout the ten years that she taught in a classroom, Lynn taught at the elementary level. Lynn has resigned as principal due to personal issues involving her job and family.

#### *Phoebe*

Phoebe is 63 years old and is retired from teaching. Phoebe went to a small college for two years and then transferred to a large state college to pursue teaching. She taught first grade for five years in an urban elementary school. When she became pregnant, she left teaching and never returned citing that it felt like it was a good break. Phoebe worked at what she described as a very 'poor' school during very turbulent times in the community.

#### *Analysis of Data*

The research involved the collection of data through interviews with participants, which I then transcribed into field notes. Upon completing the transcription of the field notes, I studied and coded the data to look for the themes, which began to appear. Using Grounded Theory, which is, "the discovery of theory from data...[Grounded Theory] provides us the relevant predictions, explanations, interpretations and applications," (Glaser & Strauss 1967, p. 1) I was able to generate theory from the data based on each participant's words.

The themes that emerged from the interviews were as follows: (1) background and what brought them to want to teach, (2) their experiences, both college and classroom, (3) their perceptions of teaching, (4) the support they felt they received while teaching and (5) the reasons that ultimately led them to leave teaching. It was during the coding of the data that the above five themes began to emerge. It was also during this process that the theory ultimately began to emerge that teaching is a unique profession that attracts people who are dedicated to people and that it is this dedication to people that ultimately shows that their families are their number one priorities.

## **Findings**

*The teacher who is indeed wise does not bid you to enter the house of his wisdom but rather leads you to the threshold of your mind. ~Kahlil Gibran*

Teaching is profession that most people enter in order to work closely with students to help shape and guide a student's learning. Students often feel the effects of the teacher's work for years. How many of us remember a certain teacher and think about how much they helped to bring out our abilities and open us up in ways that we never had been before? It takes time and energy to open up a student to learning.

There is a body of research that contends that reasons some teachers choose to leave the profession include: salary, working conditions, lack of mentors, and lack of administrative support. In this research, current and former teachers were interviewed to gain their perspectives and experiences in education in order to determine if it was these or other contributing factors which held true for them. In order to get the full picture of each participant, their backgrounds of what brought them to teaching, what experiences they had while teaching and what ultimately caused them to leave teaching were discussed. Through this process of exploring their backgrounds as well as their experiences, I was able to determine several themes.

The five main themes emerging from this research are: (1) background and what brought them to want to teach, (2) their experiences, both college and classroom, (3) their perceptions of teaching, (4) the support they felt they received while teaching and (5) the reasons that ultimately led them to leave teaching. Each theme is an important step in telling



each person's perspectives on why they wanted to teach and why they ultimately chose to leave.

**What inspired them to go into teaching? *"I knew I always wanted to be a teacher."***

Teaching can be a very rewarding career to chose. Many people select this profession because it allows them the opportunity to work so closely with people, and the potential to shape young minds. What led each of the participants in this research project to consider education as a career is varied. Some decided at a very young age that they wanted to teach, but others made the decision based on the career opportunities that were available at the time that they were entering college.

***The love of teaching.***

Most of the teachers in this study expressed an early interest and love of teaching. Gloria first felt that she wanted to teach when she was quite young, "I was about 6 or 7 and I just knew that I loved teaching." Lynn concurred saying, "I was one of those people that when I was a kid I always had a love of teaching." These two educators took very different paths to get to the classroom. Gloria pursued teaching right out of high school at a major university, but Lynn chose to first explore horticulture. "I actually had my own business for a year...then when I got back into the school, I just realized that I had a huge interest in education again and went back to school." It was her own daughters going to school that made her realize that she loved school and education.

Jane was also a person who knew when she entered school that she wanted to be a teacher, "I just fell in love with school. I loved school, and I loved the teachers. Every year I loved school, and each year reinforced that I wanted to be a teacher because I loved everything I did." Jane knew at five years old she wanted to teach. This is a common

sentiment shared by many of the participants; however, most were not quite that young when they felt the urge to teach. Interestingly, the three women who shared that they always knew they wanted to be teachers were all over the age of 50. In fact, two were over the age of 65.

The other participants began to feel the calling to teach at a later age. They were still in secondary schools when they began to feel that teaching might be an option for them. For Jennifer, it was a child development class that she took in high school that sparked her interest. She found it to be a fun class, and she really enjoyed the connection she felt with the kids. "I felt that it was really rewarding to connect with children; I felt this connect. I felt that I learned that I could get them to do things. Turns out that helps when you're teaching." Inspired by this class, Jennifer began to explore a career that would bring her back to the classroom so she could continue working with that connection she felt and enjoyed. For Kathy it was a different pull that made her think of teaching. She had many family members who were teachers, so she felt inspired to become a teacher. She remembers, however, "I always loved the school atmosphere - you know being in school, so I guess it made sense to go into education."

These five participants all had a calling early in their lives and knew before leaving secondary school that they wanted to teach. They all report having good experiences in elementary and secondary school, and all felt inspired by their own teachers to explore teaching. Four of the participants also report having a love of education. From loving the feeling that school gave them to loving the learning environment, they report that they really loved being in the school. Lynn stated, "I just didn't want school to end or the learning to end."

***It's what women do.***

The women in this study who were over 50 mentioned another reason for becoming teachers; there were not a lot of career options available to woman. Phoebe decided to become a teacher because:

Back in that era the options for women weren't, you know, well there were options, but you really had to be quite committed and assertive. My mother was a teacher, and she said, 'Well you know it's a wonderful profession to fall back on.' So I just ended up teaching.

At the time that Phoebe entered college, there were not many career opportunities for young women. She really feels that, "I never actually chose the profession as much as it chose me." Phoebe is not the only participant who reported that there were not many options for women at the time. Gloria also stated:

My mother was a teacher, my grandmother was a teacher and two of my sisters were teachers, so I saw teaching as a logical career for a girl. And at the time teaching and nursing were the only two fields for women, and I didn't care for the sight of blood.

Based on remarks of these two women, perhaps part of the problem of teacher retention now is more a case of there being more opportunities available to woman beyond a career in education.

***I can teach too.***

Bob is the one participant who actually worked in education before he pursued getting his teaching degree. He reports:

I was thinking about it in high school, but it really set in when I started college and I got a job as a paraprofessional at an elementary school. [I think] it originally started because my brother has a learning disability so I wanted to get into special education.

As Bob was the first in his family to go to college, he did not have a history of family members becoming teachers. He had neither an early love of education nor the limiting of

options due to gender. Instead, he was inspired to work in education by a family member who has special needs.

For the participants in this research there were many different reasons why they became teachers. For some, it was a desire from childhood while for others it was a matter of circumstance or experiences in teaching. For most of the participants there was a love of teaching and some mention the love of learning.

**From Pre-Service Hours to Classroom Teaching** *“They just handed me the keys and said here is your classroom.”*

In this research, the area of experience focuses on not only the experiences that these teachers had in college in regards to their pre-service teaching or student teaching, but also on the experiences that they had in the classroom.

***Pre-Service or Student Teaching Experiences***

The educational background of each participant is a valid theme to examine because it is the preparation that they received in college that may have helped or hindered their abilities to cope with teaching in a classroom. The educational background of the participants is quite varied. Three of the participants received their teaching degrees by attending one college and being admitted to the college or university’s education program. Of the three, one received a dual license from the program she attended. Two participants went first to either a junior college or another university and then completed their program at a different college or university with an education program, as the school they were attending did not have one. One participant first attended a program that would get him into a classroom quickly and then later attended a program specifically for special education at another university. The last participant actually received a degree in horticulture and worked

in that field for many years before returning to college to pursue a degree in education. She then went on to receive a Master's Degree and completed her administrative work at another college.

The experiences that these educators had while in college are varied also. Each college that these participants attended seemed to have their own requirement for pre-teacher candidates. They all had student teaching experiences, but their quantity of pre-service hours varied. For Lynn, the experience that she had completing pre-service hours was in two different classrooms, which gave her profoundly different experiences. The experience that she had with a 1<sup>st</sup> grade teacher was one that made her think, "I was not impressed with the woman teaching, an older woman. I remember she got angry with a kid, and she first of all opened his desk because he couldn't find a paper and tipped everything out all over and she was yelling at the kids." This experience was one that made Lynn reflect and left her feeling shocked by the behavior of the teacher.

Two of the participants had hours or checklists that they had to complete for their program, which they did through work in classrooms. They were active participants in a variety of activities in the classroom to gain experience in a functioning classroom. Kathy stated that, "Outside of student teaching, I only had a small observation of a class that I did, but I do not remember it being for more than a day at most."

Jane had an interesting experience that she shared. The college that she attended had a school within the program for gifted and talented students through which potential teachers could go teach a lesson or class to get the feel of a classroom. It was housed within the university, and the students in the classroom were selected to attend this school. They called it a demonstration school, "...and so we would go and observe these excellent teachers and

that was very interesting.” She also remembers going to schools in the community as well before student teaching. Gloria also mentioned teaching at a demonstration school at the university she attended:

I taught at a university demonstration school under the supervision of a college instructor. It was a great opportunity to work with kids, but these were not an average group of kids, they were honors students who were picked to be in this classroom. There was one girl who tried out this class, she only did it one day, and she switched her major the very next day. I also spent a quarter teaching in an area school under the supervision of an experienced teacher. This included interaction with teaching staff in the lunchroom and lounge, getting all around experience of what it was to be a teacher.

The college where these two women attended no longer has the demonstration school, which both felt was unfortunate as it was a great experience.

### ***Classroom Experiences***

The participants have varying degrees of experience teaching in the classroom. Jane was a teacher off and on for approximately 36 years. Gloria, Phoebe and Kathy only taught until they had children. Jennifer and Bob have taught for six years each and Lynn taught for 10 years. All have taught past the five-year mark, and all have either left or are considering leaving the classroom.

Phoebe is the only teacher who started and ended her teaching in one school district. In fact, she spent her entire teaching career in the same grade level at the same school. She worked for the school district that she did because when she was looking for a job it was the only district that had any openings available. “And, of course, being a new hire I ended up at the worst one [school building], those positions that weren’t filled.” She had many negative experiences at the school: the inability to get books, overcrowding, difficult students, numerous changes in administrations, and even a school riot. She shared about her experience as a teacher:

The time that we had larger class sizes and kids transferring in and thirty [class size total] kids or so, kids we'd have to jam the desk in, that was just impossible. Just the noise level was unbelievable to control. The [year that I had] eighteen kids [class size total] created a whole different atmosphere. They were nice kids, but I had had nice kids before but they had just been lost in the shuffle.

Gloria was a junior high English teacher who moved from a Minnesota district to an Illinois district during her teaching career. She felt very lucky because she taught in one of the top schools in Minnesota and found the students and their families to be wonderful. In her last school in Illinois, she was allowed to be at school during student hours only and she very much enjoyed that. She reported from her whole experience with teaching:

During the 1960's the standards began to fall by the wayside. Teachers began wearing jeans to school and losing the respect of the students. They were too casual with students, beginning to be their buddies. They lost the respect and the discipline of the students. I later worked as a substitute, but I found the administration no longer supported the teacher. One student noted that I was not a "real teacher" like the regular teacher. This was probably something that the student picked up from the "regular" teacher. Professionalism had really gone downhill.

Kathy's experience was as a high school business education teacher. She really only wanted to work with high school students but recalls that she was given all the freshman classes because she was the new teacher. She taught mostly typing classes and mostly freshman, but she was assigned a couple of junior and senior classes. Her first year of teaching was difficult not only because it was her first year but also because, "I came into kind of a mess and the situation of the classroom." The teacher prior to her left suddenly because she had hated the age group she was teaching. Kathy also reported that she felt that she had a really good rapport with the kids she worked with because she invested more than just classroom time in her students, "I was interested in them as people, not just in the

classroom full of students. I would go to their ball games and show interest in other things they did outside my classroom.”

Lynn’s experience in the classroom is one that involved her moving around from school to school. She taught in many different positions in southern Minnesota either as a substitute or as the classroom teacher. She found that in many cases she was just handed keys and given a class roster. In one school district, she had a long-call substitute position; “I taught in that school the whole year except for two weeks in September, and he [the teacher] came back the last week of school which was devastating to me because they were like my kids.” She continued to take substitute positions until she was able to get a full-time teaching position. That position ended after three years due to budget cuts. Lynn finally ended up in the Minneapolis/St. Paul metropolitan area where she again took a position as a teacher in an elementary school, but she began to consider doing more for the school than just being a teacher. Lynn stated, “I took on a leadership role in something [professional development activity] because no one wanted it and I figured ‘I love this’.”

Jennifer has experience that involves working within the special education department, first in an elementary school and then moving to one within a middle school. She has worked for two different districts moving because of a few bad experiences she had within the first school district. She has worked in a couple of resource rooms (a resource room is a room in which a student with a disability can receive direct instruction for a brief period of time) and also has worked with some pullout groups and, in her words, “just kind of managed some behavior as I could along the way.” In special education programs, a teacher often manages a caseload in which students have various disorders. Jennifer has managed caseloads where she has children who may have labels of Learning Disabilities



(LD), Emotional Behavioral Disorders (EBD), Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) or Other Health Disabilities (OHD). She found that, “I feel like we’re often getting these kids in our programs that probably really aren’t special ed [education]; it’s just that there’s nowhere else to go.” She found that not enough students are separated out from those with actual disorders so that it made programming difficult for the ones that really needed the extra attention.

Bob’s experience as a teacher involves working first in Illinois and then in Minnesota. He has worked with mainly 4-8<sup>th</sup> grade, although he taught in a K-3 EBD classroom for two days before he told the principal he could not work with that grade level. He has also taught students with LD. He has had experience with students who are pulled out for some of the school day and with students who are with him all day and found that in his most recent position there is a real lack of consistency in the schools. Bob shared the following about his experience in special education:

I think special ed [education] has too many loopholes and excuses for students that truly are bad students. I think instead of, I’ll give you an example: a student gets expulsion from our school. All of a sudden they say ‘you know what? Well he should be referred to special ed [education].’ Amazingly he qualifies, he was up for expulsion, he would have been expelled, but now he qualifies because he’s depressed which is seems to be the same idiom. Every once in a while there are just kids that are bad seeds. Instead of making excuses for the bad seeds, these kids that truly are bad and should have been expelled are ruining it for everyone else are now in the system and now it’s special ed it’s protected even more because of disabilities. Then when you don’t follow through on the change of placement, then you’re stuck. And whether it’s bringing a weapon to school or a drug to school, it’s impulsive; they think it’s real. Whatever you want to call it, it’s endangering the safety and the education of others. So that’s been an issue and I really wish there would be something said regarding kids that are just not good, not because they’re special ed but because that’s part of life. There’s good people, there’s bad people; that’s what makes people individuals. And just because of that, there’s got to be a different scenario for them. Unfortunately it happens on more than one occasion.”

Jane has had a combined total of 36 years in education. She has taught, left, taught again, and changed specialties during her career. In the end she left classroom teaching. She began teaching a 2<sup>nd</sup> grade classroom and then moved into special education. She explained that in the 1960's they did not have special education so they called it tutoring. She then left teaching for many years. When she returned, she taught special education for 24 years. She then left and now tutors as a side job. Her experience in education encompasses the very beginnings of what is the special education system today. She found that she really enjoyed working more closely with students, and that is why she chose special education. She worked with students who were in the general education classroom that would come to her for help. It is difficult to identify the categories of the students she worked with because the labels have changed so many times over the years, but she worked with what would now be identified as LD and EBD. She had a bad experience in one district in which she was given a setting 4 EBD (this is a special education classroom where the students are in for the entire school day or 100% of their school day) classroom with 15 students and, "one paraprofessional who was probably not capable." That was at the beginning of what is now the EBD educational system, and she said, "...there were no EBD teachers, there were no counselors, there was no help."

All of these teachers have had many different experiences, some very good and some very challenging. While the personal classroom experiences, positive or negative, of each participant varied, what they did have in common was a background of pre-service experience. From their experiences in college first working with students as student teachers to their experiences working in their first classrooms, there are themes that begin to emerge. Even though some faced difficult situations early on, none left teaching during those critical

first years. However, the experiences that these participants had in pre-service and in their classrooms do become a contributing factor in their eventual decision to leave the profession.

**Perceptions of Teaching** *“I always saw a teacher as a person who was held to a higher moral standard.”*

Entering any job, one will have pre-conceived ideas of what they think the job will be like. Often a person can conjure up a romanticized view of the job. Many movies have been made and books written in which a teacher appears as a person who can conquer the toughest situations to reach the children and get them to learn. In education, colleges and universities have tried to counteract this romanticized view by requiring that students seeking a teaching degree spend time in classrooms working with students and licensed teachers to get a good sense of what the job really entails.

***What a teacher should be.***

The participants had shared common concerns when entering education, but their perceptions of what teachers should be were varied. Gloria stated, “[they]...should have plenty of patience, but I don’t know if I knew that then. I knew that they should adhere to certain moral standards because they would be noticed and looked up to, therefore, you must be what is expected.” This view of a teacher as a role model changed from the 1960’s to the 1970’s when teachers became “buddies”. Kathy shared that, “I know I always thought that a teacher needed really to be able to relate to their students and not be like a real disciplinarian or aloof or whatever.” Then by the 1990’s when Bob was considering the field he stated, “I realized after I started teaching that a teacher was more than just a teacher. It’s a parent, social worker, brother, sister, mentor, psychologist, you name it. A Jack-of-all- trades.” Based on what the participants shared, there has been a change in how teachers are viewed:

from a member of society who must adhere to a higher standard, to a person who tries to be a buddy, to finally a person who encompasses many roles in a student's life. This shift may be a leading reason that people leave the classroom. The role of teacher has changed from someone who teaches a class to someone who now needs to be more than that to a child who now faces more issues and challenges. This is a difficult shift for a teacher because it can cause a great deal of stress that a teacher may not be prepared to undertake.

Talking with Jennifer, we see that her preconceptions were similar to Gloria's. She views a teacher as someone who, "should be patient and always be positive, nurturing and, yes, that stereotypical kindergarten teacher." Although Jennifer began her teaching career nearly 40 years after Gloria, she had similar views of a teacher as Gloria but does not talk of the moral standing that a teacher may hold in the community. Jennifer also discusses that she had heard that teaching would be, "...high stress, and there's multi-tasking and high expectations." The concept of high expectations matches the views that Gloria shared, but Jennifer is the only teacher who shared that she had the idea before entering a classroom that teaching was going to be high stress. It is possible that in the 1960's teaching was a position that did not have the degree of stress that it carries now with the requirements, graduation standards and the increased involvement of parents.

Lynn, who began teaching nearly 30 years after Gloria, shares with Gloria the view that a teacher must meet high standards; Lynn states that a teacher was, "...a professional and had ethical behavior in all realms of your life. That you will be a role model for families and kids, certainly for your own family, and certainly practice what you preach." Lynn's comment links the changing view of a teacher, and she echoes Gloria's view of a teacher when she explains, "I knew that they should adhere to certain moral standards because they

would be noticed and looked up to.” Bob highlights the changing perceptions with his comment that a teacher is, “...a parent, social worker, brother, sister, mentor, psychologist you name it a Jack of all trades.” These three teachers show the changing views of teachers from the 1960’s, to the 1990’s to the year 2000. The role is changing for teachers; it is becoming much more than just a mentor or a person of certain moral standards. Teachers now wear many more hats for the students with whom they work.

Phoebe was the only teacher who entered teaching with no preconceived notion of education. She stated, “I was too stupid to think about all that. I just blindly went forward, and that was that.” She stated that her own experiences with teachers in her past was what created this lack of preconceptions of teachers; “I had such a variety of elementary teachers myself, many of them elderly ladies.” Her inability to relate to the elderly teachers created a disassociation to teaching for her. Phoebe, like Gloria, had a mother who was a teacher, and stated, again like Gloria, that, “I don’t know if I ever decided [to become a teacher]. Back in that era the options for women weren’t you know [available]. So I just ended up teaching.” This is perhaps why she did not contemplate the career path because there were very few other options.

### ***Classroom Management***

Discipline or classroom management came up in several of the interviews. Many of the participants mentioned that there was a concern about how they were going to manage their classrooms when they finally get their own rooms. Kathy was concerned that she may not be tough enough, “I never considered myself, or I didn’t want to be like a disciplinarian... I always wanted to relate to them...I started teaching when I was 21, and I had high school kids, and it was fairly easy to relate to them because they weren’t that much

younger than me.” In Gloria’s school, “We had a disciplinary Principal as well as the regular Principal. The disciplinary Principal was there to help.” Jane adjudged that discipline, “...[that] it would be control of the classroom and managing students, but these were normal concerns.” Bob felt prepared for the challenges; “I was fresh, I was excited, and I was already a teacher assistant in a classroom for five or six years so I saw a lot of procedures in special education and the school support system of behavior management.” Although these participants mentioned discipline as an issue of concern when entering teaching, it was quickly dismissed. Although, Gloria did mention that her days as a substitute ended when, “A student in my class who had been sent to the office for classroom disruption was allowed by the Principal the privilege of leaving school on a personal shopping trip.” She felt, “The Principal had rewarded the boy rather than restricting him, sending the wrong message about the role of discipline in controlling classroom behavior.”

Although Lynn left teaching in a classroom, she still worked within a school building and retained her excitement about teaching and view of how much fun learning could be. When she began teaching she felt, “When you first get into it, you see the passion for learning, the passion for teaching, and all of those things about discipline and management and political things in school and parent things. I don’t think I really thought about everything. I just think I really thought about the teaching and learning part.” For Lynn the learning quickly overshadowed any fears of discipline in her classroom.

The various preconceptions that these teachers had about education do seem to shed light on another contributing factor as to why they decided not to remain in the classroom. Whether it was their perceptions of how a teacher should interact with students or their

concerns over classroom management, when faced with day-to-day reality, their preconceptions began to unravel.

### **Sources of Support: Peers and Administration** *"Oh, my yes, I had a lot of support."*

Many of the participants in this research project reported that there were people available for them to go to when they started teaching, whether they were assigned mentors or peers that they sought out themselves. This research shows that the level of support that the teachers in this research received was dependent on the districts that they worked for.

#### ***Mentorship***

Jane, who taught the most years, described a mentoring program that she felt was an excellent and helpful program. She had a person who would come visit her in the classroom her first year, she explains:

They had what they called the helping teacher, and this woman came in, and she would do demonstration lessons for my class, and she would help me just organize and group and solve problems, and she was a tremendous help. She also held meetings and training. She was available by phone if I needed. I just really enjoyed watching her teach because it was just excellent modeling.

Jane felt quite strongly about the support she received in her first years when she eagerly stated, "Oh yes they did, they gave me a lot of support."

In sharp contrast, Phoebe who worked for the same district as Jane did not feel that she received support from the district. "There were some gals that came around and did demo lessons and everything; they didn't come very often." This is the opposite of the support that Jane said she received. In fact, Phoebe stated that the administration, "...ignored us to a great extent." Phoebe did, however, find a person that she considered a mentor on her own. "I had a wonderful elderly long-call sub [substitute] who had the other first grade, and she was a fabulous help. If it hadn't have been for Pearl, I would have never survived."

Phoebe had her own opinion about the administration lack of support for her building and why she felt this way, “I think there were schools that were better in better areas, but I think sometimes it’s hard to look beyond your situation. It was so miserable there.”

All the participants spoke of some form of a mentor program that was available. Each person had different views of the programs. Gloria had a mentor who she considered to be, “...very nice and helpful. Each teacher new to the system was assigned a buddy who could help you ‘learn the ropes’ and fit into the system.” She did state that hers was also an English teacher, and that she would attend departmental meetings in which the teachers would share ideas with each other. She did not go to her mentor for help often. She did feel that she got a lot of help from the school. She also mentioned that, “the first year was hard because it was all new, and I got too tense; but it got easier, and my fellow teachers were very encouraging.” Although she did not always have a structured mentorship program, the encouragement of her co-workers seemed to be a good motivation for her.

Kathy acknowledged she did not have an official mentorship program in place at the school where she worked. She had a person that she would go to but, “It wasn’t an assigned thing; it was just sort of he was the person I would go to ask questions because he taught business education also and had been there forever. So he was my mentor, but it wasn’t an official like they try to do today.” She also noted, “Since we taught different things, I did not go to him often for help.” Also Kathy started at her school by stepping into the middle of a difficult situation; the previous teacher had quit midyear after having difficulties controlling the classroom. She felt that the school was more supportive of her because of that. Kathy reflected, “I had specific older teachers that I talked to everyday. They were very helpful to me; of course they liked to give me a hard time as well because I was the newbie on the



block.” This friendly interaction with her peers seems to have been a real positive in her teaching experience as when she shared this she had a big smile and a giggle about it all.

Jennifer was able to participate in a mentorship program when she started at her school, but, “I don’t think it was the best-fit mentor.” She stated that while her mentor was, “...nice, I think it would be more helpful to have someone from my building...” adding that, “[the mentor was] Very friendly, but I think it was hard to ask questions about my building. I had more questions about figuring out the social norms, the copy machine, this gen-ed [general education] teacher is like this, and this is how we do it at this school like those are some of the hardest ones.” She feels that, “...the building rules and norms are hard to figure out.” Jennifer did find her own mentor in her building, “He was my teaching partner. We were in the same room doing the same job.” She believes that, “...this person taught me everything I needed to know.” Although the mentor program that was offered to her at her first district did not meet her needs, Jennifer averred that, “I do think the mentorship programs help. I feel like those are a great thing.”

“Yes, surprisingly I was shocked at how much support I got,” Bob shared. This was in regards to the first district in which he worked. Bob explained about the mentor program at his first school that, “...it was more of one lady visiting the schools, and we would meet once a month and [do the] documentation as part of the first year teacher assignments.” Bob explained that this mentor did not have a license in special education but that she was an academic coordinator for the district. Bob states, “The ones that helped me with special ed [education] were primarily my team members, which was minimal, and my wife who is a school psychologist which is the person that refers the kids to my classroom. So she was my foundation to ask questions.” Despite the fact that Bob’s description of the mentor program

that he was involved in at first does not appear to have been very supportive, Bob expressed, “I think they [his first district] wanted me to succeed.”

Lynn had a situation in which she did not receive any mentoring when she started teaching. She was a long-call substitute so they did not offer her any mentoring. Lynn states:

The whole time I was there the principal did not step foot in my room once. If I, I remember going and asking questions, everyone would close their doors. I remember there was a guy across the hall who taught sixth grade who I would go in and ask things, I remember he was very generous but nobody would help me. She [the Principal] wasn't even concerned with how I was doing. Obviously she didn't get complaints or she would have been in there. I went down and sought her out a couple of times. It was like 'here's your keys'. There was just not that thinking of mentoring or any of that. It was 'here's your keys, here's your thirty kids'.

Lynn could not recall that any of the schools she taught at provided a mentoring program. She really felt that the people around her were not into peer work or teamwork approach such as is available now. For Lynn, “It was almost like if you asked questions then you seemed incompetent sort of.” Once she started to pursue her administrative work, she did receive a type of official mentoring program, but even that person was not particularly available to her, as she would have liked. She did seek out her own personal mentors but not until later in her career. In her beginning years, she was left to fend for herself and figure it all out along the way.

It was this experience that led Lynn to create programs in the school where she worked as an Assistant Principal to help mentor people at all teaching levels, whether they were new or experienced teachers. As an Assistant Principal, she was assigned all the new teachers, and she would work with them to help them grow. Lynn states, “That was one of my favorite parts of the job.” She went on to explain, “I started to make connections

[between staff members] where if someone wanted to do something better or wanted a better way of doing it, I would say ‘you know, you should go observe this person, they’re doing this’ and I would try to get them together.”

Bob was another who chose to become a mentor to a young teacher. He states that he volunteered because he was the only special education mentor and that there was a special education teacher new to the district in special education. It was not a good experience for him though because:

It just never really meshed well. I tried going there. I’m a kind of talkative person. But it was, I feel I’m pretty easy to talk to and it was very hard to strike a conversation. I’d be like, ‘How are things going.’ ‘Fine.’ ‘Do you have any concerns?’ ‘No.’ It was tough, it was tough. And she’s not a talkative person, very quiet, not as receptive.

For Bob, the experience of trying to give back by mentoring has left him feeling like it was too much work for too little pay. He is unsure if he would have ever done it again as it really took a lot of time away from his family.

Many of the participants did not stay in one district during their time as teachers. For many, they moved at least once; a few moved several times. Of those who moved, four did receive some type of mentoring program at the new district but for only two participants was it any type of extensive program. It mostly was a program that gave them a person in the building to talk to about building mechanics and norms.

#### ***Administrative support for the teacher.***

Support in a district may not always be just an official mentoring program. Support can also mean the type of support that a teacher can feel from their peers and the school’s administration. Many of the participants felt that they received a lot of support from their peers and administration. Bob, Kathy, Jane, and Gloria all stated that they felt that their

administrations wanted them to succeed in their districts. However, there were a few participants who talked of situations in their districts in which they felt they were receiving no help or support. Jennifer and Bob, who worked in the same district in the same program, gave very similar comments about what was happening. Bob explained a situation in which the administration was not supportive:

Students are one thing, administration and the follow through with the special education process is based on money. A lot and there's no follow through, there's political. If you do this it's your last step, especially with EBD's [Emotional Behavioral Disorder] setting three students. It's been shown on numerous occasions they need a setting four placement and there's no setting four placement in the district so guess what? They would have to refer them to a district where a setting four placement would be \$50,000 per student per year. So the district basically said, 'No we're not doing that.' So it's come down a couple of times to the whole team felt it was time and yet the one person felt it wasn't going to happen and that's illegal because the whole team decided and now it's like a dictatorship. You can't have that, what's the purpose of the team if you have six, seven, eight people sitting around saying it's time and he's [the administrator] just gonna say no.

Jennifer described a very similar feeling in regards to the same administration:

There's been a tremendous lack of support from my special ed administration. Like our department, our team we go above and beyond for our students time and time again, and at the end of the day the administration is asking, 'What more can you do? We need you to do more.' I feel like we're dealing with too many high need students that we're not programming appropriately, and it's impacting the rest of the department the rest of the students, making it really hard.

Both of these people have expressed strong feelings about the lack of support they felt they received from their administration while teaching in this particular district. One has already found a job in a different field and the other is seriously looking and wants to go into a different career.

**Why They Chose to Leave** *“I have never experienced so much personal criticism in my entire life as I have here and I can’t stay.”*

The focus of the research was to talk with former educators and current educators who were planning on leaving who had been in education past the five year mark to determine if there was a commonality that might help to determine why these experienced teachers’ leave. Through an examination of their experiences and perspectives of teaching, the following factors to choose to leave arose as common influences.

***Lack of Support***

Lynn is a person who did not begin her professional career as an educator but rather as an entrepreneur who owned her own business when she decided to go back to school to become a teacher. Throughout her interview she referred to her, “love of learning.” “I loved the people that I met, the learning that had taken place and even that I had made a difference in my professional life so I think I anticipated going on even further.” She began her teaching career via a path that many teachers take, substitute teaching. This can mean that you move around a lot even if you take long call positions. Lynn was finally able to get a teaching position in a school for three years, but ended up being the victim of a budget cut. She did finally find another full-time position, but she began to feel like she wanted to take on more of a leadership role, so after ten years of working in a classroom she left to become an Assistant Principal she explains:

...probably after I got my Master’s. I finished that up in the spring and then I think it was in the fall maybe the summer, I can’t really remember what totally triggered that if it was that I didn’t want school to end or the learning to end. I just thought gosh if I’m a principal I can make a bigger difference, not just in my classroom, but I can make a bigger difference. Do things.

It was her love of education that made her leave the classroom. Unfortunately, she now has decided to leave public education. She is going into private educational consulting businesses and no longer working with children in classrooms. What made her leave behind work that she loves so much, Lynn explains:

The criticism [in her current position]. Everywhere you turn. The parents, the staff. I have never experienced so much personal criticism in my entire life as I have here and I can't stay. Never. I was a Principal in [at another school] for a year; I was an Assistant for five years never. I experienced this to some extent, but this is over the top. It feels like it's worse than I have ever worked in my life. I don't know if that's true or if it's the role I'm in. I think that there's a chance that anything I would try to do would not have been successful and I got to the point where it didn't matter. So I don't want to end up in a totally unhealthy place.

Bob is an educator who first worked in another state as a paraprofessional and then as a teacher. He became a teacher to try to work with a population of students it is very difficult to get teachers: EBD. He felt that he received good support at the schools in Illinois, but here in Minnesota the administration is making him feel like, "I am babysitting him [a specific student on his caseload] now. All the other kids are missing out on an education because I have to compensate for behaviors happening in my classroom." Bob feels that he is not receiving the support he needs to do the job he wanted to do when he started. He wants to help kids, and now he feels that all he is doing is watching them. He feels trapped by the administration that are there to help him educate his students. Bob is going to leave his job, "...unless something changes drastically." The situation at his school with administration not following through or backing a teacher is causing Bob a great deal of stress at work which has begun to carry over to his home life which is causing him to make a tough decision for himself. As stated above, there are children in his classroom who are missing out on an education because of the extreme behaviors that are taking over.

Jennifer began working in an elementary school at one district and moved to a middle school of another district. She has a real love of education and likes to connect with students. She was able to find her own mentor when the assigned mentor was not a good fit. She regrets feeling that she must leave education, but as she states, “I am burned out.” She taught for six years and felt on entering teaching, “I had the mentality that I’ll start out in special ed [education], and then if I need a break I’ll go into regular ed, but as I learned there’s a lot of challenges just in a regular ed [education] classroom as well.” Her reason for leaving the profession is simple, “It’s just toxic. It’s seeping into my personal life, it’s seeping into my mental health.” For Jennifer, it was her family life that made her walk away. She began to, “bring the school problems into my home by talking about it too much to my husband.” She feels she was pushed into this decision to leave by the ever-increasing challenges of the students and the lack of support from the administration, but she ultimately walked away because she feels that her family life is more important than teaching.

### ***Family Comes First***

Phoebe was a teacher in the same district for her entire teaching career. She stated that she got into teaching at her mother’s suggestion and because of the lack of job opportunities for women at the time. She taught at a very difficult school in a poor part of a metropolitan area. Her students had many of the same issues that the students face today: poverty, one-parent families, and violent environments. She did not feel a great deal of support from her district and often had to fight to get her kids decent materials and to keep her class sizes low, which she feels is key to success in schools. However, it was not any of this that caused her to leave education. She left for the same reason as many women in the 1960’s did; she started her family. “At the time there weren’t so many women who went

back to work and put their kids in daycare and things like that so it just didn't occur to me." She later stated that she never even considered returning to teaching, "...it seemed to be such a break...and there were classes I needed to take in human resources, I never got back to them."

Gloria was a teacher first in an affluent Minnesota community and then in a poor area of Illinois. She enjoyed teaching kids and especially preferred working with junior high students. She also got into teaching because there were few options for women at the times, but she also had other reasons. She chose teaching because she came from a long line of teachers, "My mother was a teacher, her mother was a teacher, my sisters were teachers." She has a love of learning, enjoys reading and has pursued further degrees in other fields. She moved districts because she got married, and she moved with her husband to Illinois. She did return to teaching after having her first child because the district she was working for at the time requested that she consider returning after having her first child. However, after completing one more school year, she left because she wanted to raise her own family. Gloria stated, "Well, you forego the extra salary, but I thought my children were worth more than money." Gloria did try to return to teaching when her children were older. She did substitute work for a few teachers, but there were no jobs in the area into which she moved. Her ultimate reason for leaving education altogether was, as she states, "Although I contacted all the schools around, there were no positions available at the time as there was a surplus of teachers." She then left teaching for good and took on an entirely new career path.

Kathy became a teacher in a small town in Iowa where she taught Business Education. She really felt it was important to make a connection with the students and would attend school events to support the students. She actually left her teaching position for two



reasons, “One, my husband was moved to a different job still in Iowa but in a different town, and at the same time I found out I was pregnant with our first daughter and so it was coincidental. I was feeling like I needed a break from it [teaching].” She did return to do some substitute work, but ultimately she really wanted to stay home and raise her kids. Another reason that Kathy mentioned for not returning to teaching is that she taught Business Education. “That whole world changed during that time period [while she was not teaching] so when I was teaching we were teaching on typewriters.” She would have had to return to school to get updated classes to become more current in the field. She later returned to work in school when her daughters entering preschool and later as a Paraprofessional, but when she is asked to get her teaching license again she always says no. “I mean we didn’t have all this paperwork...the things that the teachers have to do today are a lot more and a lot more complicated and more difficult than the things I had to do, and that’s enough to kind of scare me away.”

### **Summary**

Teaching is a profession in which the person who chooses the profession took a very specific career path through college and into the working world. This project explored five themes which were: (1) background and what brought them to want to teach, (2) their experiences, both college and classroom, (3) their perceptions of teaching, (4) the support they felt they received while teaching and (5) the reasons that ultimately led them to leave teaching. Through these five themes the participants were able to share their experiences and perspectives to try and give insight into what would cause an experienced teacher to leave education.

Teachers leave the profession for many different reasons, some very similar. In all of the reasons listed by the participants, none of them even mentioned salary, a common response in numerous previous research. Also, there is a great deal of research on mentoring programs, which the participants were asked about. Regardless of whether they reported that they participated in a good or poor mentor program, none reported that the mentor program was a reason to leave. This research shows that working conditions are a factor, but more than that, the participants reflect that the working conditions are directly affected by the administration support. However, most importantly, family are a pivotal factor for the participants whether it was for the health of their family, support of their family, or the fact that there were changes in their family. The overriding factor that influenced the participants in this study to leave teaching was the well being of their family.

## **Conclusion and Recommendations**

This research shows that the factors that lead people to teaching are not necessarily strong enough to keep them in the classroom. The participants in this research were kind enough to share their life experiences with the researcher in an attempt to examine more deeply what really causes experienced teachers to leave. This research discusses the participants' backgrounds, their preconceptions of teaching, the support they received, and each participant's ultimate reason for leaving. What surfaced in every interview was that each participant valued their family over their teaching career. This may seem like a simple and clear-cut choice to make, but as this research shows, it was not always an easy decision for each participant. Many of the participants had felt a strong desire to teach from very early on. There were always multiple contributing factors that led them to choose to leave, be it lack of support or challenging working conditions. But in the end, the most pivotal influence on their choice to leave was love of family. Whether they left to raise their family or left because their job was causing a strain in their family, each person felt that in the end their family came first.

This theory is supported by the fact that the women interviewed left their positions either as they got married or had children. They saw their position in education as one from which they could easily step away. In the interviews, they were asked if they ever looked back and regretted their decisions; all participants who left felt no regrets. They all believe that they made the right choice for their families. A teacher is a special kind of person, a person who is willing at any time to give up all that they know to do something entirely different from what they had planned.

To simply say that a person leaves because of family obligation does not take into account the history that Jane has with education. She left to raise a family, but while gone she continued to pursue further endorsements so she could return to teaching. Gloria also left teaching, but returned periodically to substitute teaching, as did Kathy. What does this say about their reasons to leave? You could assume that they no longer held their families above their careers and therefore returned to teaching, but this would be incorrect. What this really shows is that a person who goes into education sees their position as a fluid one, one that he can leave and re-enter easily at any given time. Recognizing this fact may make districts see that it is possible to draw experienced teachers back into the field. However, administrations also need to recognize that frustrations over mentorship programs or lack thereof and the feeling of lack of support from the administrative staff can cause teachers who come and go to raise families to not return.

Ultimately, teaching may be a unique profession that attracts people who see real value in their personal health and well being and greatly treasure the people in their lives. This can be utilized by a school district that is willing to be more flexible with schedules through split hours or days for some teachers in order to work around the person's changing lifestyle. This can also lead a district to re-examine policies that only consider personal leave for situations regarding family and not close friends.

This research only reflected those who leave the profession, but how completely accurate are these numbers? What about those teachers who move with their families and begin a job in a new district as Bob did? I was unable to find any data that reflected this sort of job shift. This raises the question then of the district that actively pursues the teacher who moves from another district. What could that district do to make that teacher choose to

remain there? This research showed that salary is not pivotal. That district possibly could entice that person to stay by creating a “family-friendly” environment. What this may entail is more flexible hours, more flexibility of schedule to allow the teacher to care for sick children, time to attend activities for his child at a different school, or additional vacation days to attend family events. Allowing the parent to still feel very present in his child’s life may entice a parent to stay at a district instead of leaving.

It is also important to note that there are other issues raised in this research. The feeling of lack of support the teacher by his administration came up for several participants; Bob mentioned that he felt this lack came down to finances that were available for the classroom. Obviously, there is only so much a district can do with the money it has, but it can be explained to staff that money is a concern in funding supplies or a program without making the staff feel that it is all purely about money. The subject of support, though, is about more than money; it is about the way that a district continues some type of mentoring program beyond the first one to three years. If the real problem is that experienced teachers are leaving, then a district needs to examine the possibility of adding additional support programs at four years and beyond. Districts may want to encourage team building and teamwork for teachers that may include extra compensation. This could open up a grant possibility for a school district.

There are more questions that could be asked beyond what was covered in this research. The research discussed background, education, experience, mentor programs, district support, reasons for leaving, and reasons for not returning; but there is much more that can be asked of the experienced teacher. What could be offered to bring them back? Would an incentive program work? Or an extended leave program in which the teacher

retains his seniority over an unlimited period of time so as to accommodate changing family needs? Another aspect would be to discuss with the participants in further detail their experiences as teachers after tenure. Did they feel that support for them dropped after tenure, or was it dropping before that time?

Further questions were raised that go beyond this research project. Why is there not more research being done regarding the teacher who leaves after five years? Why is so much time and energy spent on researching why new teachers leave when our government is requiring the retention of “highly qualified” teachers? This research brings to light that more effort does need to be spent on retaining these qualified teachers who are already in place. There was considerable research that reported over and over that mentor programs are successful. We know these programs work; now we need to determine what comes next. What will it take to keep people working in the field of education?

I propose that the following recommendations be considered for implementation:

- School districts should try to be accommodating to teachers who would like to continue teaching but also would like to have more time at home with their children and families.
- School districts should invest more time in mentorship programs that go beyond the first year extending into the fourth and fifth years to continue to lend support to staff that may have begun to question remaining with teaching.
- School districts should encourage and actively recruit teachers with more years of service to be mentors to the new staff.

- School districts should encourage second year teachers to connect with first year teachers regularly as an unofficial mentor to that staff. A new staff member should feel that he has more than one person to go to for help.
- School districts should ask their staff for reflective feedback on whether teachers are feeling supported by their administration and then follow-up with staff on the results of the feedback.

This research project has explored the perspectives of teachers who have either left or are planning to leave the field to determine if there is anything that districts could do to encourage them to remain in teaching. As the research in the literature review discusses, there are financial solutions that have been suggested ranging from forgivable loans to incentive pay. This however, would not appear to be a pivotal incentive for the participants of this research. In all of the interviews and discussions, money was rarely mentioned, if at all. These participants were far more motivated by family concerns and the support of their colleagues. This is why I have presented the above recommendations to districts as alternatives in the hopes of keeping experienced educators in the field.

### **Self-Reflection**

When I was deciding to research the subject of why experienced teachers leave teaching, I was going through a bit of a crisis in my life. I was in the middle of a very difficult situation at a school at which the entire program was having problems. I consider myself to be a very strong person who prides herself on trying to tough out situations and making it through. I especially find this to be the case in teaching. The really nice thing about working in education is that every fall you get a fresh start. There are always new kids, new staff, and sometimes new buildings that keep the job fresh. However, I was having a hard time getting past the sludge that I was sinking into this past winter; I was considering not returning to teaching. I decided to turn this negative energy inward and to focus it all on this research project.

I really felt that by talking to people who had quit teaching, I would find my own answers. What I really found was a great deal of encouragement. Although the people I talked to either had left or were considering leaving education, I found that they were not full of negativity but rather were full of positive feelings about teaching. Many of the interviews left me feeling a lot better about what was happening to me. After many of my interviews, the conversations would continue on about me. We would exchange stories, and I would always leave an interview feeling a lot better about my choice to stay in education. I also gained a great deal of respect for my co-workers and co-teachers. To me, this was a very rewarding experience.

I entered this research not knowing what I would be able to find. My participants often would start off saying, "I don't know how much this interview will help." They were



all very helpful. I would often share with the later interviews some of the insights that I was finding. One fact that I was discovering was how much those who entered education really were people who truly and deeply valued a connection with others, especially their family. The major finding I learned from this research is that it is possible that there may never be definitive way for a district to retain the highly qualified teacher because it is not the money or the paperwork; in the end it is the people.

I am very glad that I chose this topic. I genuinely feel that this is an important topic to have researched, and I hope that further research is done. I was disappointed when I was not able to find statistics or much research that involved the loss of the teacher with over five years of service. I understand the importance of keeping the new teacher, but to entirely overlook the experienced teacher in the process is devastating to the profession. I would think that in the near future there would be more research on this topic as No Child Left Behind continues to loom over districts. I hope that districts will value what I believe I have uncovered through this research.

For myself, this research helped me to make a decision that I was deeply troubled about at the time, and it turned out great. I remained in education and with a district that I feel values me as an employee. What I sincerely hope is that when I hit that five-year mark, I will still feel the same way.

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